

## Lou Bellamy and Chris Widdess Penumbra Theatre Company's Leadership Team

*Conducted by Kate Liberman  
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*Katie Liberman visited Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota to talk with Founder and Artistic Director Lou Bellamy and Managing Director Chris Widdess about their efforts to transition out of the organization to which they had collectively dedicated 40 years. Bellamy formed Penumbra in 1976 to be "about", "by", "for", and "near" the black community of St. Paul. Today Penumbra is one of the few black theaters to survive the 30-plus years since the peak of the black arts movement in the 1970s. Widdess came on board in 2004 as the company struggled with its finances and its focus.*

### **You two seem to have a great relationship.**

**Lou Bellamy (LB):** Yeah, yeah, we knew each other before this and already had an appreciation and a respect for each other. And then when Chris first came in, she got my trust, and that isn't easy because I'm an asshole in real life, but she did, and the way she got it was, she was really clear on what it is she wanted to do, and that was to refine our mission and agree on it, and help me, or help the institution preserve my legacy. Now who the hell's going to argue with that?

We don't always agree; that isn't the case. But it's never that I think that there's an ulterior motive, or mendacity, or trying to corner me, and that had always been the case in the past, where the managing director felt that I wasn't quite doing the right thing, and if they could just get me to do the right thing, then everything would just fall into place.

I mean, there's a, I hesitate to say this, especially

to a white person, but the perspective, the self-awareness, the ethos that many black people have come to feel and project has to do with the way the society looks at them. You are kind of what the society tells you you are. We had been so used to being beat up and losing and being down, but [Chris] came in, not of that experience and said, well, we can put some paint on this! And then it started just infecting us all! And it just started with her coming in and saying, let's be proud. I say it, but I wasn't living it in the same kind of way because I was inside of it.

### **Chris, what was Penumbra like when you came on in 2004?**

**Chris Widdess (CW):** When I came to Penumbra, it was very similar to entering a home of domestic abuse. There was a lot of fear, there was a lot of anger, there was a lot of victimization.... You could feel this need to be alpha dog. To find a place

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where everybody can see that there is no good or bad, right or wrong, to be able to get around a different kind of table... you've got to find what that is. And for Penumbra it has to be the mission.

So all of a sudden instead of being angry at the board, or being angry at the accounting department or being angry at Lou, they now were refocused around a different topic, so it became easy to let go of all of that. And in the examination of the mission, it got everybody talking again about who they are, what they do, and why it matters. So we took every facet of the organization: every role, everything from answering the phone to pulling the light-switch on the stage lights, [and asked] 'How does this articulate our mission?' 'How does it activate the mission?' Because it's not good enough just to talk about the mission if you're not activating it.

**LB:** I am the founder. That's both a boom and a bang. I know why we started out to do what it is we're doing. And we have lost our way over the years at times and fortunately have come back to the original mission and it turns out that's our strength. When you grow, the tendency is to create this large tent that everybody can come under because you want to grow and you need all those resources. I've since learned that it's better to hold onto your mission and your intent and those who want to come along will and those who don't, you're probably better off without. Because what they tend to do is water down your [mission] to the point it's problematic.

#### **And what is that core you want to preserve?**

**LB:** We started out to tell stories that were not being told in theater in [this] country and certainly in the Twin Cities. The geography of the nation has changed significantly so we found ourselves being pushed to amend our outlook a little bit to fit this new geography. For instance, we have a black president now. I hear people talk about a post-racial America. If the Guthrie's doing this [black theater] work or if anyone is doing this work, then why do you need a black theater? Well the point is that their interest in [the black community] will wax and wane. There are times when we sort of coexist, where our missions overlap, but the responsibility for maintaining a trajectory of community and artistic development will always rest inside the community.

One of the things that I find most frustrating is the way in which black people believed in the promise of America and gave up their institutions

when integration happened. Everyone said, 'We don't need this parallel development that we've had.' In order for black people to be served they had to provide those institutions that took care of them. The larger society wasn't doing it. So, all of a sudden, the larger society says, 'Okay, you're in, you've passed the test, we dub you human. All of these things that everyone else was privy to, you can now share in them.' The community believed that and all those [black] institutions went by the wayside. Well, it turns out that blacks still stand outside of many of those opportunities and so the community, in my view, was sort of left adrift because those institutions were now gone and the larger society wasn't serving blacks to any large degree.

What I see is that the responsibility for artistic and community development and so forth will always rest inside of the community. And that's why we're low to the ground; our work is in and of the community. We're a professional theater, there's no doubt about that. Our production values are very, very high, yet we're answerable to and part of the community. I define us as a professional theater inside the community.

The price for being part of that larger society for black people has been traditionally giving up that community link. 'You can come, you can go, but you can't bring all them other people with you, we ain't havin' that.' So what our task has been is to keep those links over the years. That makes for a special kind of theater, a special kind of audience and a special kind of responsibility.

#### **What are the greatest challenges for Penumbra right now?**

**LB:** Now this local community is changing, it's being gentrified. You know, the way it looks now, we may be the only black folks left here. I remember arguing with August Wilson about this issue. He said, 'Culture is something you put in your pocket. You take it with you, you throw it down, and it's there.' And I said, 'I don't know man, I think it's in the ground.' I grew up in this neighborhood and I know what this neighborhood is, what it can be. So those kinds of questions are still up for grabs.

We've got to continue to make the case that we're doing something authentic and special. What we bring to the table that no one else brings is that specific, informed cultural criticism. There's no other place to get it than with these people. And you don't get it by placing it somewhere else and expecting it

to flower and be the same. It won't be.

The main challenge that we have is getting our budget up and to a sustainable level so that we can afford to hire and maintain the staff that we need. Right now, we're cheating at it. We're cheating at it because [Chris's] well off enough so that she can afford to be here for 50K. I'm working all kinds of other jobs so that I can afford to be here. Dominic [Taylor, Associate Artistic Director], we recruited him because we got him a job at the University [of Minnesota]. Our society or our board, they don't appreciate us in the same kind of way as if we could hold it together. I think that's the main challenge. [Chris's] got it clicking so it works, and the functions are there, but now the challenge is to make it sustainable.

**CW:** Our definition of sustainable is to pay competitive salaries, so that employees have a reason to stay here for ten or fifteen years at a stretch. It's the turnover, the churn of employees at arts organizations that keep [the organizations] where they are. It has nothing to do with the art; it has nothing to do with the community's ability to support them – it has a lot to do with the fact that we reduce ourselves to that level. We think of ourselves that way; it's something to do with the non-profit [status] and the arts and howling at the moon and doing things for the passion of it, because everybody knows in non-profits you don't get paid well, so you have to do it because you're passionate. And that might be true in a lot of areas but I don't think it has to be true. And I don't think that as a business we should treat employees that way or expect them to behave that way, or expect them to adopt that standard of living. I just find it insulting.

The theater is in a leadership transition as well as a business model transition as we go into the short-term future. The reality of it is that our society is changing, technology is changing a lot of the ways in which society interacts and functions, and the way businesses work.

**Two of the plays in the 2010-2011 season are collaborations with "majors" as you call them—the Kennedy Center and the Guthrie Theater. How does that connect to the ideal community-based approach you describe?**

**LB:** Oh, it's tough! It's a deal made with the devil (LAUGHS). Whenever we do collaboration, it is [because] we recognize that all the partners have a set of skills, and the idea is to bring those together in a way that will serve a larger community. You bring organizations together to do something that neither of them could do alone. That's the reason for collaboration. If that isn't there then it's probably not a good idea.

Whenever we come in as a partner in collaboration, we are the cultural experts. I'm not coming in there saying 'Teach me about black people Kennedy Center, teach me about black people Guthrie.' No, I come in with that. I'm the expert there. This organization is the expert. We bring the authenticity to the mix. So our roles are very, very different in those situations. That's the way I try to explain it. When we begin to play in those larger organizations, in those larger venues, the levers are greater. We're pulling at biiiiig levers. But we are still the interpreters of the work and it's still answerable to this little St. Paul community.

I think as long as we're able to realize the strength of those kinds of relationships and keep on building them, then we'll be in good shape. We've got a good foundation right now with the Guthrie, the Kennedy Center, with Arizona [Theatre Company], with Kansas City [Rep], with Cleveland Playhouse. These are all major regionals that are way bigger than us, but still we're the experts. We're the ones brought in to "authenticiize" the work. As long as we can position ourselves in that kind of way I think that our place is well-earned and deserved and we can be of worth to those organizations.

You see, we're doing art for social change. If we're not contextualizing the art then there's no difference between us and everybody else.

**How has your recommitment to Penumbra's mission prepared the organization for the upcoming leadership transition?**

**CW:** Leadership transition is always unique. I don't think there's a tutorial or a textbook on it that is realistic, because each organization is so different, their culture is different, the circumstances under which they exist, their here and now. It has to be a conscious decision, not a random one, that you want to change that fiber [that holds the organization together].

So a lot of theaters, the founder goes away and the board hires a replacement, and I've always been mystified by that, because the boards are not experts in the field. They're transitory and their role and purpose for being there is not the art. It may be because they might support the art and they believe in the art, but it's not because they do the art. And I always found that fascinating, that they would then feel the responsibility and the role to anoint the successor. I mean, that would be to me like a scientist dabbling in DNA and yet not having a conscience about what they're doing with the DNA.

And so I feel very strongly that Penumbra needs to internally determine its destiny. The artists, the founder, need to figure that out. I am totally fine if the theater closes down tomorrow. I am totally fine if it wants to live on for another hundred years. But we need to make that decision so that we know all the baby steps that need to be taken so that the mission is articulated and activated all along the way. So I mean, it's really basic stuff, but it gets complicated, and people try to either oversimplify it or overcomplicate it, and it really just boils down to, what are we doing with this DNA?

**LB:** When [Chris] wanted to revisit the mission statement, I hit the ceiling. I said, 'Oh no, I know what we do.' And it was the smartest thing we ever did. It didn't change [even] one or two little words. It was nothing, but they all bought in—by that I mean the board and staff—and so that now, it's like a contract: "Well, you bought into it, so let's go!" Whereas before, I was imposing it, and I was afraid to let go of that.

**CW:** The other thing that we've done that's worked very well for us—and I think it's very much in keeping with who Penumbra is—is this rather egalitarian approach to the way the business is structured and the way the business is run. So the staff doesn't report up to the board, the staff reports with the board. So the board understands that they

have roles and responsibilities that deal with governance and all of that, but we're all in this together.

**LB:** The board used to be the enemy, they were the adversaries. They'd say things like, 'Why do you have to be so strident in your choice of plays?' 'Why do you always see the glass half full?' Well those are telling things and I wasn't listening! And there came a time when I had to just throw down the gauntlet and say, 'NO, we're not changing this. I can't go any further with you.' And at the same time, the debt was high and those people who didn't truly believe just said 'Oh no, I can't be a part of this' and they left. And that was a good thing. That was a great thing. About half of our board left. That was right before Chris came.

**CW:** [Now] our board really understands that they report to us and we report to them. They share their work plan, we share our work plan, and we ensure that our work plans dovetail together.

**If you'd like to avoid having the board name a new artistic director, how do you anticipate new leadership will be identified?**

**LB:** I want to set up a relationship with a number of directors and a number of artists so that whoever comes in here to begin to run this place can call upon them so that the aesthetic is still clear and straight. So these are people that I will have worked with, that I will have talked to, that know what it is we're doing. Whoever [the successor] is. It's still being shaped at this time.

But one thing I'm sure about is that between those two people, [the artistic and managing directors], the aesthetic will be maintained and I think we'll be in good hands. It's odd the way the organization gets shaped. It gets shaped to serve its leader in a kind of a way. I'm a director. So this place is shaped and comes together in a way so that I serve that function. If another person were here then it would be shaped in a different kind of way. And I think that's just moving pegs, as long as we're clear about the aesthetic and what it is we do in our relationship to the community.